

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND TACKLING INEQUALITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 5
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Report of the Solicitor to the Council

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BLUE BADGE REFORMS

1. PURPOSE

1.1 To inform the Committee about the reforms to the blue badge scheme for disabled parking.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Committee consider the reforms of the blue badge scheme and makes any appropriate comments.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

3.1 This report is linked to the Sustainable Community Strategy priority of creating opportunities, tackling inequalities.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 Few changes have been made to the blue badge scheme for disabled parking since it was first introduced in the 1970s.

4.2 Applicants are automatically eligible for a blue badge if they meet one of the following criteria:

- are in receipt of the higher rate of the mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance
- are registered blind (severely sight impaired)
- are in receipt of a War Pensioner's Mobility Supplement
- have received a lump sum benefit under the Armed Forces and Reserve Forces (Compensation) Scheme and been certified as having a permanent and substantial disability which causes an inability to walk or very considerable difficulty in walking

All other applicants are subject to further assessment, and may be eligible for a badge:

- if they have severe walking difficulties
- if they have severe upper limb disabilities in both arms and regularly drive a vehicle
- if they are a child under three with specific medical conditions

4.3 The current problems of the scheme include:

- high levels of abuse and misuse of badges – the estimated national cost of abuse is £46m per annum.
- increasing demand for badges and pressures to extend eligibility to the scheme – forecast growth of 27% nationally over the next 10 years.
- inconsistent administration and assessment throughout the country.
- inefficient service delivery and customer service.

4.4 In February 2011 the Government announced that it would be reforming the current scheme by introducing significant changes that would:

- ensure fairer allocation of badges to those most in need
- allow improved and effective prevention of abuse and enforcement
- deliver efficiency savings and improved customer services
- enable the reforms by raising the badge fee

5. BLUE BADGE REFORMS

5.1 Ensuring fair allocation of badges

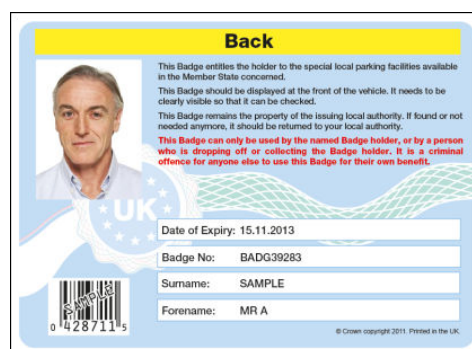
A number of measures have been or will be introduced to help ensure that badges are issued fairly and that the scheme is sustainable in the long term for those who rely on it most. These measures include:

- control of NHS spend on eligibility assessments transferred to local authorities
- a requirement for the use of independent mobility assessments to determine eligibility. This will take effect from 1 April 2012.
- extending eligibility to more disabled children under the age of three with specific medical conditions
- providing continuous automatic entitlement to severely disabled service personnel and veterans

5.2 Prevent abuse and improve enforcement

A number of measures have been or will be introduced to prevent abuse from happening in the first place and to deal with rising levels of fraud and abuse. These measures include:

- the introduction of a new badge design that is harder to copy, forge or alter. The new blue badges are made of a durable PVC construction and include a comprehensive range of new security features.



- new arrangements for secure printing and distribution of the badges to prevent fraud and to effectively monitor cancelled, lost and stolen badges.
- the introduction of the Blue Badge Improvement Service to enable more effective

detection of abuse by local authorities. Officers will be able to check details of new badges issued anywhere in England, Scotland and Wales.

- proposed introduction of new or amended powers for local authorities to tackle abuse and fraud, including:
 - ❖ extending the grounds available to local authorities to refuse to issue and to withdraw badges
 - ❖ provide local authorities with a power to cancel badges that have been lost, stolen, have expired, or have been withdrawn for misuse
 - ❖ provide local authority authorised officers with a power to recover, on-the-spot, badges that have been cancelled or misused
 - ❖ amend existing legislation to clarify wrongful use of a badge and powers to inspect badges

5.3 Delivering efficiency savings and improving customer services

A number of measures have been or will be introduced to help local authorities improve service delivery and achieve efficiency savings, and to improve customer services for badge holders. These measures include:

- the introduction of the Blue Badge Improvement Service (BBIS) that will deliver operational efficiency savings. This project is self-funding and should deliver national efficiency savings of between £6.5 and £20m per year by providing:
 - ❖ secure printing, personalisation and distribution of the new badge design
 - ❖ a central database of all badge holders and badges in circulation
 - ❖ on-line applications via directgov
 - ❖ fraud prevention – automated checks will be made at application stage to verify information and prevent multiple applications
 - ❖ quick and easy enforcement checks, including via smart-phones
 - ❖ significant operational and other efficiencies – estimated to be to £20m per year nationally
 - ❖ better monitoring and control of badges, including ones reported as lost or stolen.

Whilst the Council no longer makes the blue badges we still remain responsible for:

- local administration and enforcement of the scheme
- making decisions on who should be given a badge
- carrying out residency and identity checks
- setting the fee to be charged locally
- uploading photographs for the badges on to the new system – applicants either supply a digital photo or physical passport sized photo which we upload

5.4 Enabling reforms by raising the badge fee

To enable local authorities to cover costs more appropriately and to enable the delivery of the new badge design legislation has been introduced to raise the maximum fee that local authorities can charge for a blue badge from £2 to £10. The increased fee will pay for the new badge design and it will enable the BBIS. Badge holders should, in return, benefit from improved accessibility as abuse is reduced.

6. **IMPACT ON PETERBOROUGH**

- 6.1 These new reforms will have a significant impact in Peterborough. As at 31 January 2012 there were 7,894 badges in circulation.

Administration Fee for Issuing of Blue Badges

- 6.2 In January 2012, an Executive Decision was made to introduce the full £10 fee for the issuing of

a blue badge. The changes in the blue badge scheme require the Council to cover a number of additional costs to meet its statutory obligations in administering the scheme and a fee of £10.00 will assist in meeting those costs. Given the anticipated charges, it is estimated the new scheme will contribute around £30,000 per annum in covering the costs of administering the scheme, including the cost of producing the new badges and undertaking all of the new checks on eligibility, including the independent medical assessments.

- 6.3 A reduced fee of £5.00 has also been introduced to replace blue badges which have been reported as lost or stolen. This is because regardless of a badge already being in issue, the Council will still be charged to replace it and the move to charge may also act as a deterrent against fraud and/or abuse.

Independent Medical Assessments

- 6.4 Currently we use the applicant's General Practitioner to provide medical assessments for those applicants who do not qualify automatically for a blue badge. The cost for each of these assessments is currently £25.15.
- 6.5 However, the secondary legislation passed by the government includes a requirement that from 1 April 2012 these medical assessments must be carried out by an independent mobility assessor. We are currently in discussions with other Council departments regarding the possibility of sharing the funding of existing occupational therapists who could undertake these assessments in the future.

Enforcement

- 6.6 One of the biggest issues with blue badges is enforcement of the scheme. The new BBIS will create a national database of badges and badge holders which will allow nationwide enforcement of badges, which under the old scheme could only happen locally. Also, the new eligibility checks will help in detecting fraudulent applications at the beginning of the process.
- 6.7 Enforcement of the scheme once a badge has been issued is of particular importance as there are currently 56 dedicated on-street blue badge bays in the city and 29 dedicated wide-access bays within City Council car parks. It is important that these bays are only used by those with a genuine need and we will be working with the enforcement team on more proactive enforcement.
- 6.8 We are very reliant on members of the public and badge holders notifying us if they believe a blue badge is being misused. Where we have the evidence of misuse we may take court action which could lead to a fine of a maximum of £1,000.

7. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 7.1 None